

focus on the extreme

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF
MICHAEL CLARK

BY STEVE LARESE

Whether it's photographing a mountain biker launching off of a 40-foot-high cliff, kayaking through boiling Class IV rapids or rock climbing with nothing but 200 feet of air between herself and oblivion, for Michael Clark, it's just another day at the office.

Santa Fe-based Clark has made a name for himself in the world of extreme sports by capturing beautiful, death-defying shots of athletes pushing the limits of their physique and, some might argue, sanity. If you've ever breezed through any climbing magazine, *Bike*, *Men's Journal*, *National Geographic*, or have seen ads for Patagonia or other outdoor sports companies, chances are you've seen Clark's work. When editors or marketing teams need big air or white water, Clark is high on their list of shooters to call.

Atom Crawford doing cartwheels on the Race Course (Class 3) on the Río Grande. "To capture this image I was shooting with a camera that shot eight frames per second, and this was 'the' select from that photo shoot." Nikon F5, Nikkor 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, Fuji Velvia Film.



"It's been incredible to work with the best people in the world at these sports, people who can do a one-armed pull up with their pinky," Clark says of the athletes he photographs. "Without photography I wouldn't be hanging out with this club."

Yet when it comes to extreme athletes, it takes one to know one. Clark, 37, earned a degree in physics from the University of Texas at Austin but realized his real passion was in rock and mountain climbing. He spent the next year-and-a-half after graduation traveling the world, looking for the next climb. It was atop 23,000-foot Aconcagua, in Argentina, the highest peak in the Americas, that Clark realized he wanted to be a photographer.

"I'm looking around and thinking, 'My photos look like the pros, I could do this. I am doing this.'" Clark would go on to know and

Santa Fe was the place to set up shop. "This was 10 years ago, and I saw that a lot of other places in the Southwest, like Moab (Utah), were already saturated with photographers," he says. "I wanted to be somewhere where I could get my shots and be close to the things I liked to do. Santa Fe met that, and there was already such an active photography community here."

Going to full-time freelance assignments in three years, Clark has since put New Mexico's landscapes in publications worldwide as backdrops for his jaw-dropping images. His steady clients include Nike, Nikon, Adobe and Patagonia. He has been published in all the climbing magazines and shoots frequently for *Men's Journal*. A recent assignment for that magazine sent Clark to Majorica, Spain, to photograph deepwater soloing, where people free-climb cliffs above the ocean.

"People get pretty brave in front of the camera, but if my athletes aren't 150-percent certain they can do something, I talk them out of it," he says. "I've never had anyone get seriously hurt. I pray a lot."

Still, there have been plenty of close calls. Of all the sports he photographs, Clark says kayaking is the most dangerous. He recalls one episode where a professional kayaker was pinned underwater in his kayak for 12 minutes on the Río Grande, the force of the water pushing his kayak down against the rocks. A person was able to rush out and lift the kayaker's head just enough to where he could breath through one nostril as water rushed past. Eventually he was pulled to safety.

"It was like watching Michael Jordan having a life-or-death experience on the basketball court," Clark says. "You realize no matter how good you are, something can happen. We were all pretty shaken up."

Clark had his own too-close call a few years ago while rock climbing on assignment for *Climbing*

magazine in South Dakota. He was on rope 100 feet above the ground getting ready to shoot when he realized a rock had frayed his rope through most of the core, and his life was literally hanging by threads. A cool head and quick friends who lowered another rope saved him, but he still keeps the damaged piece of rope on his desk as a reminder that the end can come at any time.



Above—Andrew Gallegos rides on N.M. 45 just south of Santa Fe. "This image was shot for my stock agency Aurora Photos. Andrew was riding his custom-built, \$25,000 motorcycle, while I was hanging out of the back of a moving pickup truck, which I was clipped into with a climbing harness and webbing." Nikon D70 digital SLR, Nikkor 28-70mm f/2.8 lens.

Opposite page—Jena Lupia climbs a classic overhanging V6 at the U-Mound boulders in Albuquerque. This image was originally shot on assignment for a *Backpacker Magazine* article in 2006. The article was about adventures in and around Albuquerque. Nikon D2x digital SLR, Nikkor 28-70mm f/2.8 lens.

climb with the late legendary climbing photographer Galen Rowell (www.mountainlight.com), who was a major inspiration for Clark.

Drawn toward art as a toddler, Clark credits a high school teacher for showing him the ropes of photography and darkroom work. With the precision of a physicist and climber paired with the eye of an artist, Clark honed his business plan and decided that

Right, above—Ed Strang dirt jumping on his mountain bike near Santa Fe. Nikon D2x digital SLR, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 lens.


Right, below—Kim Gattone trail running in Tsankawi, an annex of Bandelier National Monument near Los Alamos. Nikon F5, Nikkor 300mm f/4 lens, Fuji Velvia Film.



Above—Roy Hughes mountain biking on the Windsor Trail in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains above Santa Fe. The Windsor Trail is a 10-mile-long single-track trail that descends 5,000 feet from the top of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains into Tesuque Village, just north of Santa Fe. This image was shot while on assignment for *Bike Magazine* several years ago for an article on the 10 best single-track mountain biking trails in the United States. Nikon F5, Nikkor 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, Fuji Provia 100F film.

Though at 37 Clark is still young and going strong, he's considered an old-timer in his extreme line of work. In addition to action photography, Clark has branched out to embrace digital photography and processing, and is becoming known as a digital guru. He's a tester for Adobe software and teaches workshops in Santa Fe and throughout the Southwest.

"I had an editor tell me once that climbing photographers aren't necessarily good photographers," Clark says. "You can throw a person on a rock, push the button and you're going to get a good shot, but otherwise people don't know photographic techniques." Clark is obsessive about keeping up to date on the latest equipment and software and employs photographic techniques, such as strobe lighting, that make his images stand out. He readily shares what he learns with an electronic newsletter available through his Website, www.michaelclarkphoto.com.

"People think this is a glorious job, that I'm always on vacation when I'm out somewhere beautiful and photographing," Clark says. "But for me a vacation is when I'm at home, not worrying about the weather, light and someone getting killed. Still, there's nothing I'd rather be doing." 



Michael Clark on the job in Moab, Utah.
Photographed by Leslie Alsheimer.



Timy Fairfield, one of the world's strongest rock climbers and a New Mexico native, bouldering at City of Rocks State Park in southern New Mexico. This image was shot for *Climbing* magazine and was subsequently published in magazines and ads all over the world. Nikon N90s, Nikkor 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, Fuji Velvia Film.